

## ***It's Always About the Epoché***

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### ***Abstract***

*To honor Giorgi's contributions to psychological research methodology, this essay strives to elucidate a key component of phenomenological methodology (the epoché), which is too often taken for granted, misunderstood, or neglected in qualitative research and the secondary literature. It calls for a renewed appreciation of the epoché and the phenomenological reduction in light of current scholarship that restores Husserl's understanding of transcendental subjectivity as always an embodied subjectivity adhered to the lifeworld – not at all a transcendentalism. Furthermore the essay comments on how mundane versions of the epoché permeate everyday life and how the methodological epoché shares elements in common with contemplative meditation traditions across cultures. The essay concludes with an affirmation of the epoché as more than an intellectual operation, but as an action involving the entirety of the person in the manner of an ethos.*

[...] the psychologist does not know what he is dealing with.

– Merleau-Ponty, *Texts and Dialogues*.

Amedeo Giorgi's project to renew psychology as a human science calls the question of methodology. Many psychologists had discussed the inadequacy of a natural science based psychology but none, until Giorgi, actually developed alternative methodologies to those of naturalist experimentalism. Humanistic psychologists would criticize the reductionism of mainstream psychology while simultaneously defaulting into that very same reductionism when it came to doing research. Giorgi was the first to actually apply the insight that the trinity of *theoretical approach*, *subject matter* and *methodology* are always already a synthetic unity – each part influencing the other. He articulated how the methodology one chooses will circumscribe the limits of one's subject matter and this limitation in turn drives theory. It is ineffective at best and absurd at worst to proclaim "theoretical" opposition to reductionism while conducting reductionist methodologies in one's research. Giorgi pointed out how this failure to develop an alternative methodology to experimentalism sapped the energy out of the humanistic and

existential movements in psychology and subverted their efforts. It is to Giorgi's lasting credit that of all the critics of reductionism in psychology, he is the one who actually took effective action by delving into Husserl's works and establishing an authentically phenomenologically-based methodology that enabled psychological researchers to explore phenomena hitherto "off limits" to experimental methods.

This trinity of "approach, content and method" works in the other ways as well. Since Giorgi's 1970 text, several other non-phenomenological "qualitative" methods have emerged. But because of this understanding that method, theory, and subject matter are always a gestalt totality, Giorgi's methodology is distinct from other forms of qualitative research. A qualitative method alone, without an accompanying theoretical context or overall worldview is continuously at risk of falling back into naturalistic thinking. In other words, without a fully spelled out epistemology (or theoretical approach), non-phenomenological qualitative researchers too often interpret their research results within the physically based assumptions of mainstream naturalist psychology and, again, subvert their own well-intended efforts. In contrast to these other "mixed" or confused paradigms, Giorgi's method is situated within the paradigmatic theoretical approach that is Husserl's transcendental phenomenology. Supported by Husserl's fuller and more comprehensive approach to empirical science, Giorgi's phenomenological psychology cannot default back into naturalistic paradigms – as so many qualitative methods unwittingly do. Through Giorgi's work, phenomenological psychology can stand on its own feet as a discipline distinct from that of experimentalism.

### ***Retrieving the Epoché***

The animating inspiration behind Giorgi's penetrating criticism of mainstream psychology and his positive methodological alternative is Husserl's own attempt to re-found the sciences on empirical phenomenological grounds. To honor Giorgi's vision of a truly human based science, this brief essay shall strive to elucidate a key component of Husserlian phenomenological methodology (the *epoché*), which I believe is too often taken for granted, misunderstood, undervalued, and underused in much qualitative research and even sometimes in phenomenological research itself.<sup>1</sup> In short, I wish to call for a refreshed appreciation of this central element of phenomenological research methodology at the core of Giorgi's life work.

Perhaps Husserl's greatest discovery, the *epoché* was achieved through his insight that objectivity itself is an "experienced" objectivity with structures that can themselves be elucidated and understood. While never denying that there is a real world surrounding us and to which we adhere, Husserl's work with mathematics showed him how this world is "sustained" through our experience of it. The most wondrous thing about how we sustain the objectivity (or sense of reality) of the world is that this is accomplished by a concurrent forgetfulness, which, like an unconscious process, descends upon us as we live our ordinary relations with the objects of the world. This "blind spot" that seems to overshadow all of our conscious interactions with the world is named by Husserl as the thesis of the natural attitude. It is important to reiterate that the thesis of the natural attitude "hides itself" within the process of human experience in the manner of a fundamental belief, not unlike a religious or political conviction, that is almost axiomatic or pre-categorical. In the manner of the Freudian unconscious, or a strongly felt conviction, this natural attitude or belief in the reality of the "objective" world cannot be elucidated through

ordinary rational discourse alone. Rationality is a necessary but insufficient condition for the elucidation of the natural attitude. Something much more potent than reason alone was needed to loosen the intentional threads<sup>2</sup> that bind our awareness to the belief (or natural attitude) that the world is independent of our consciousness of it. It is in this context that Husserl developed the methodological *epoché*. The *epoché* is the means through which Husserl discovered the blind spot of the natural attitude and well as the "method" for overcoming its limitations and rediscovering the world in the manner of an explorer encountering a vast new continent.

Again, the full power of the *epoché* is too often taken for granted by qualitative researchers and even sometimes by those of us professing to be phenomenologists. We too often assume it is a simple matter to suspend judgments, hold back our prejudices, or become aware of our assumptions. But what Husserl meant by the *epoché* is much more radical than we often recognize. To hold back our existential commitment to the very existence of the world, i.e. the reality positing power at the very core of consciousness itself, is a profoundly challenging and painfully difficult undertaking. It would be incorrect to treat the *epoché* as a simple mental technique or "professional" procedure that could be easily taught in an institutionalized manner as one would instruct a simple craft or practical skill. For the *epoché* is an action that involves one's total existential position toward the world and is thus profoundly personal. In other words, the *epoché* is not a merely intellectual operation. It is often likened to a type of a conversion experience that can be a shock to one's previously held convictions. Furthermore, achieving the intellectual flexibility that permits one to stand back at a distance from the natural attitude involves an extended preparation and intellectual familiarization with phenomenological literature. While the reflexive discipline of phenomenology is thus best promoted through access to Husserl's own philosophical reflections, it is most importantly through the *practice* of the *epoché* that one comes to understand it, i.e. through the experience of the *epoché*. It does not come easy. This is why Merleau-Ponty writes: "There is probably no question over which Husserl spent more time – and to which he more often returned, since the "problematic of reduction" occupies an important place in his unpublished work" (1962, p. IX).

### ***Epoché and Reduction***

In light of the difficulty of undertaking the *epoché*, let me review some issues regarding terminology that have led to some misunderstandings. Firstly, Husserl had a remarkably open-ended and non-dogmatic approach to his work and was always revising his own thought and technical terminology, which can be very confusing to any reader. There is an ongoing ambiguity in Husserl as well as in the commentary literature on the concept of the *epoché*. Firstly, the terms *epoché* and phenomenological "reduction" are often used interchangeably or with subtle differences. When used in a manner distinct from one another the *epoché* more commonly refers to the initial process that uncovers the role of the natural attitude while the reduction more often refers to the advanced and more specific types of *epochés* undertaken after having first achieved the initial *epoché*. In other words, a reduction is what I do after having first already suspended the natural attitude.

### ***Eidetic Reduction***

Another feature of the "reduction" is what Husserl often called the "eidetic reduction" where I suspend existential assumptions about a particular phenomenon, or I view it only within a particular frame of interest or disciplinary domain. Relevant here, of course, is the psychological reduction where I put out of play all phenomena that are not psychologically relevant. What may be confusing is that there can be a multitude of eidetic reductions. To risk simplification again, one could best understand any eidetic reduction as the domain of the fictive or imaginary. One of the most radical implications of the *epoché* (or reduction) is that once I suspend my natural attitude assumptions of a Cartesian split between my consciousness of the world and the "external" world itself, an entirely new relationship is established between the imaginary and the non-imaginary. Within this standpoint, one can begin to see how all objects exist in time as gestalt composites of both imagination and perception and that these two aspects are always co-present as apperception (Husserl, 1964). So it is the task of eidetic reduction to explore this new apperceptive domain and to methodologically engage imagination to vary and interrogate the objects one is striving to understand. A synonymous term here is imaginary variation where I apply imagination to behold as many viewpoints of the phenomenon that are possible to arrive at what is essential to all possible perspectives. Thus, the eidetic reduction is contingent on the domain or discipline within which one is working as well as the particular phenomenon being studied. This is the domain most directly relevant to Giorgi's concrete phenomenological methodology.

### ***The Transcendental Reduction***

The next term I wish to clarify is the "transcendental reduction" which is the most debated and perhaps misunderstood feature of Husserl's methodology. An admittedly overly simple rendering is that the "transcendental reduction" is where I suspend my own ordinary standpoint as a particular existence. In other words, I step back from my own assumed subjectivity and take a new standpoint as a witness to the streaming of my own subjectivity. In Merleau-Ponty's terminology, we could call this a kind of "hyper-reflection". Poststructuralists and Postmodernists of the past few decades have reacted against the idea of a transcendental reduction as they misunderstood it to imply an absolute standpoint that was itself another variation of the foundationalism (or metaphysics of presence) of scientism on the one hand or romantic idealism on the other. Perhaps the term "transcendental" opened Husserl to these misconceptions, and it is true that his earlier publications may have offered this impression. But these dismissals of Husserl's thought are outdated misconceptions that recent scholarship is setting right (Zahavi, 2003; Weldon, 2003). When we take up his corpus in its entirety, another light is cast on this matter.

Unfortunately, there are historical circumstances that explain why the entirety of his manuscripts has been off limits to researchers for so long. Husserl's Jewish heritage made his scholarship vulnerable to the Nazi government's racial laws. The mass of his manuscripts written across an enormously productive career had to be hidden and remained tragically unpublished for decades. The failure of post war continental scholarship to put right this ongoing legacy of Nazi suppression is hard to defend. Fortunately, scholars such as Dan Zahavi (2003) have been

demonstrating how, across the entire span of his career, Husserl always saw subjectivity as adhered to the world and our relations to others in an embodied and incarnate manner. His seminal text, *Ideas II*, though written in 1928 was only published in German in 1951 and translated into English as late as 1989. This material demonstrates Husserl's deep concern with the experiential body as the ultimate point of contact between consciousness and nature – which he calls "constitution". For Husserl, within the transcendental reduction, all possible experiences, perceived or imagined, appear as a spatio-temporal orientation to the perceiver's living body. Only through one's living-body can the experienced world become constituted. In Husserl's words, "[...] all that is thingly real in the surrounding world of the ego has its relation to the body" (1989, p. 61). He continues to say:

Furthermore, obviously connected with this is the distinction the body acquires as the bearer of the zero point (*null punct*) of orientation, the bearer of the here and now, out of which the pure ego intuits space and the whole world of the senses. Thus each thing that appears has *eo ipso* an orienting relation to the body, and this refers not only to what actually appears but to each thing that is supposed [imagined] to be able to appear. (*idem*)

Thus, for Husserl, the entire spectrum of possible experiences, perceptual or imaginary, is rooted to this corporeal zero point which is the bearer of the here and now. From this we can see how Husserl's notion of the transcendental does not entail an isolated disembodied ego extended at a distance above the lived world of perceptual experience, as implied in the postwar literature, instead, corporeal experience is *itself*, for Husserl, the transcendental ground. This spatial zero point of the body coincides with Husserl's understanding of a temporal zero point, namely the impenetrable upsurge of the now point that perpetually slips from reflective articulation. All consciousness is, for Husserl, immersed in the ongoing temporal stream, but unlike abstract linear time independent of consciousness as experienced within the natural attitude, the transcendental reduction reveals how subjectivity *is* the upsurge of temporality itself. For Husserl the living present, which is the carnal presence of the body, is a spontaneously self-generated act, it:

[...] is the absolute beginning [...] the primal source, that from which all others are continuously generated. In itself, however, it is not generated; it does not come into existence as that which is generated but through spontaneous generation. It does not grow up (it has no seed): it is primal creation. (1964, p 131)

So, again, we can see that the transcendental reduction is never a removal from the life world into another ideal world or into some absolute position of certainty. To the contrary, the further one engages in phenomenological interrogation the more one comes to see the deeper dimensions of our adherence in the world through our profound belief structures – or what Merleau-Ponty calls our perceptual faith.

Husserl's works are consistently taken up with the issue of the upsurge of meaning (or constitution) that is the continuous contact point between subjectivity and the surrounding life world. One of the most misquoted "critiques" of Husserl's methodology is taken from Merleau-Ponty's statement: "The most important lesson which the reduction teaches is the impossibility of

a *complete* reduction” (1962, p. XIV). But Merleau-Ponty’s careful use of the word "complete" does not indicate a rejection of the reduction at all. His is, in fact, a clarification and defense of its necessarily ambiguous character. Merleau-Ponty, who had access to Husserl’s unpublished writings, goes on to paraphrase Husserl’s understanding of the reduction (or *epoché*) as the attitude of a perpetual *commencement* (p. XIV) or beginning. In this regard, the postmodern criticisms of Husserl's work as a kind of "metaphysics of presence" are quite inaccurate. It is ironic to note that in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy which was itself interpreted by many postmodernists as a proto-postmodernism, one can see the profound influence of Husserl’s epoché across the entirety of his last and most significant work *The visible and the Invisible* from beginning to end. Finally, it was Derrida (1974), the seminal figure of postmodern thought who penned the critical notion of a "metaphysics of presence" who contributed to this misrepresentation of the transcendental reduction as "logocentric". While this was certainly a suitable critique of the naïvely materialist assumptions of naturalistic psychology, this concept was actually preceded by Husserl’s own analysis (1964) of the temporal "now point" as perpetually slipping from the grasp of conscious experience. That this Derridian notion may have been used against Husserl is a matter of great irony.

The transcendental reduction is a "problematic" that one "enters into" in the consideration of it. There is no final goal, end point, or position to the transcendental reduction. It is as fluid and ambiguous as is the life-world itself. The so-called "ego" (or "I") that is the unique standpoint achieved through the transcendental reduction is best expressed in Husserl’s own words: “But though the transcendental I is not my psychological I, it must not be considered as if it were a second I, for it is no more separated from my psychological I in the conventional sense of separation, than it is joined to it in the conventional sense of being joined” (1927, p. 702). So the mundane or psychological ego and the transcendental standpoint are really two "aspects" of a common subjectivity – one constructed as a natural object in the world and the other as a standpoint upon that objectified self. They are not "separated". Commenting on the same passage Zahavi remarks:

The relation between the transcendental subject and the empirical subject is not a relation between two different subjects, but between two different self-apprehensions, a primary and a secondary. The transcendental subject is the subject in its primary constitutive function. The empirical subject is the same subject, but now apprehended and interpreted as an object in the world, that is, as a constituted and mundanized entity. (2003, p. 49)

It can be argued that a psychologist need not take recourse to the deeper "philosophical" dimension entailed by the transcendental reduction. It could be that the psychologist need only work within the disciplinary domain of the eidetic "psychological reduction" that confine itself to the strictly psychological phenomena. I must say, however, that I find it hard to understand how one could mindfully apply the psychological reduction without first grasping it’s full context from within the hyper-reflective position of transcendental reduction. Once one enters the *epoché* and can stand apart from the natural attitude, why would one limit oneself to only one dimension of reflection? In this light, Davison and Cosgrove (1991, 2002) make forceful and detailed arguments for the necessity of the phenomenological psychologist to first achieve the

transcendental standpoint in order to "return" to a more fully cognizant psychological standpoint. Also, while the disciplinary distinction between philosophy and psychology is appropriate, within the phenomenological standpoint these boundaries are considerably more porous and take on new meanings that require fuller explication.

### ***The Epoché of the Natural Attitude***

Alfred Schutz, a student of Husserl's who also had access to the unpublished manuscripts, best elucidates another aspect of the *epoché*, which is too often overlooked in the literature. Schutz's contributions were focused on the mundane multiple *epochés* that exist across the spectrum of everyday social life. He argues that the ordinary world of the natural attitude is itself composed of many unreflective variations of the *epoché* and how, like figure and ground, we are always already within some variation of the *epoché*. Schutz describes how for the ordinary person, it is not *belief* in the world that is suspended, as in the disciplined phenomenological reduction, but that in the mundane course of everyday living the ordinary person is unwittingly always already performing an *epoché* of *doubt*. He does not suspend belief in the outer world and its objects, but on the contrary, he suspends doubt in its existence. What he puts in brackets is doubt that the world and its objects might be otherwise that it appears to him (Schutz p. 229). For example: watching a good movie, reading a novel, or even in ordinary daydreaming I maintain my imaginary world because of my power to not only suspend my belief in the mundane non-fictional world surrounding me, but, most crucially, my ability to suspend any *doubt* in the fictional world I am temporally inhabiting. Daydreaming is particularly illustrative of this *epoché* of the natural attitude. Daydreamers can articulate how their fantasies are sustained so long as they can hold-off doubt in this fictive world (Morley, 1999). This is also the goal of any filmmaker or playwright – to allow an audience to postpone doubt in the fiction they are experiencing.

But there are further dimensions to this suspension of doubt. Schutz shows how it is an essential feature of the natural attitude itself to put in abeyance any contradiction to the naïve realism of the everyday assumptions of ordinary life. Phenomena anomalous to the assumptions of the natural attitude are put aside. It tellingly exhibits intolerance to the strange, the weird, or the uncanny, as much as it suspends the reality of personal death, or sexuality, or even certain social phenomena such as the pervasive economic injustice that surrounds us. Furthermore, Schutz shows how the *epoché* of the natural attitude sustains multiple worlds, or "finite provinces of meaning" each one distinguished from one another through a sort of amnesiac barrier that is the natural attitude. Like soap bubbles each region of meaning is self-contained until contact with another region pops one bubble into another. There is the world of aggressive office politics that bursts when one enters a place of religious worship, a world of fantasy or daydreaming that ceases when I am forced to attend to the car I am driving, or the world of night-dreaming that explodes upon me at the sound of my alarm clock in the morning. Schutz describes how passage from each province to another is experienced, like any *epoché*, as a psychic jolt or "shock" as in a gestalt switch from figure to ground, but never gradual.

But distinctions must be made. The mundane *epoché* is an unfocused unreflective *epoché* that constrains experience and drives our awareness within the limitations of the natural attitude. In contrast, the phenomenological *epoché* is a focused, self-reflective, and disciplined *epoché* that offers options and possibilities for our understanding of the world in a manner best described as

liberating. Nonetheless, this insight into this other aspect of the *epoché* could not only contribute to much empirical phenomenological research and open new avenues for methodology, but it could also support new pedagogical approaches to instructing students in the practice of the *epoché*.

### ***The Epoché and Contemplative Practice***

Husserl often used the term "meditation", in the sense of a mental discipline, to describe his methodology. Yet, as phenomenology was instituted as a rigorous response to 20<sup>th</sup> century natural science one hesitates at the use of this term as it is conventionally associated with religious practices. If one assumes meditation to be an inherently religious practice then his hesitation would be justified. But historical precedent indicates that this is not the case. There are many "meditation traditions" across culture and history that maintain an agnostic or even secular standpoint and meditation practice is not the sole property of any particular religious tradition. The Greco-Roman cynics and skeptics, from whom we actually take the word *epoché*, were famously secular. Chinese Taoism, Indian Samkya-yoga and the Buddhist mindfulness traditions are also secular or agnostic in matters of theology. And even those religiously monastic institutions that practice contemplative or meditative techniques are rarely religiously orthodox in the literal sense of the word as "right belief". I make this point to argue that phenomenologists need not fear any drift into mystical occultism should we engage in dialogue with other traditions of "mental discipline". And I suspect that there is much to learn from these traditions without risk of losing our own secular identity within the Western academy and sciences. Furthermore, it is a testimony to its validity to acknowledge how culturally specific versions of the *epoché* have previously been articulated and practiced in other cultures separated from us by geography and history. For example, one of the clearest examples of this corroboration is in the classical yoga tradition where the technical Sanskrit term *nirodaha* corresponds almost exactly to the meaning of the Husserlian *epoché* (Morley, 2001, 2008). These centuries old meditation traditions may indeed exist outside of the academic and scientific context of phenomenological psychology, but they may contribute very concrete insights into the meditation *practice* that is the *epoché*. It would behoove phenomenologists to take advantage of these living traditions and their rich literature and practices.

### ***Conclusion***

In light of our discussion of the transcendental reduction, I wish to conclude with a reiteration of the thought that, as the *epoché* is a practice that involves the full existential engagement of the researcher as a whole person, the *epoché* is more than an intellectual operation or a professional technique. While it is a method, it is not just a technique or tool in the ordinary sense. The *epoché* and all the various forms of the reduction entail a type of disposition or attitude, a value system. One could even call it a way of living. While I would not go so far as to say that the *epoché* is an explicit morality or ethic, I would venture to call it an implicit *ethos*. It is a commitment to assume the position of perpetual beginner and a childlike yet disciplined openness to the world as an ongoing birth of meaning. It is a stance of wonder, astonishment, and



what is essentially a *trust* in the truth of the world to reveal itself on its own terms – not the terms of the mundane ego of the natural attitude.

Finally, I hope this brief essay has made a small contribution toward a renewed appreciation of the importance of the *epoché* to our research endeavors. I have made no attempt to pretend to give any final word on this enigmatic practice that is at the heart of the phenomenological endeavor. I only ask that it receive a more sustained discussion and focus in our work together. Again, I give thanks to our teacher, Amedeo Giorgi. For, by conscientiously instituting an authentic phenomenologically based empirical psychological methodology Giorgi has built upon and has, in all practical ways, even surpassed Husserl in this particular disciplinary domain. Because of Amedeo Giorgi the next generation of phenomenological psychologists have a very well worked soil from whence to grow and an infinity of tasks before us.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Linda Finlay's (2008) recent publication offers a much more detailed exposition on the concrete practice of the epoché than is offered here. Finlay also calls for a more sustained focus on this issue and provides a remarkable example of how it is possible to explicate and teach the concrete *practice* of the epoché. Hers is one of the few concrete examples of how one actually performs the *epoché*' in psychological research. This essay is intended to be a compliment to hers – in every sense of the word.

<sup>2</sup> In Husserl's words, this is an "inhibiting" or "putting out of play" of all positions taken toward the already-given objective world. Also a parenthesizing of the Objective world (*Cartesian Meditations*, pp 20-21). I think it best described in English through the expressions: suspension, holding in abeyance, and withholding of assent. It should never imply any sort of violent "cancelation", "cessation", "suppression" or "disregard" that would close off awareness. Regardless of terms, what matters is that the *epoché* is understood as an attitude of contemplative *openness*.